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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ISTANBUL 000011

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SUBJECT: ARMENIAN PATRIARCHATE: AN UNCERTAIN FUTURE

REF: 08 ISTANBUL 574

Classified By: CONSUL GENERAL SHARON A. WIENER FOR REASONS 1.4(B) AND (D)

¶1. (C) Summary. Armenian Patriarch Mutafyan Mesrob II has been suffering from dementia since late 2007, and in 2008 Archbishop Aram Atesyan took over the administrative responsibilities of the patriarchy as acting patriarch. On December 3, the Patriarchate petitioned the Ministry of Interior for its approval to move forward with the election of a co-patriarch. The MOI has yet to provide its final approval with regard to the date of the election, but, according to patriarchate contacts, did give initial approval to review candidates for the position. Patriarchate contacts confide they anticipate elections prior to April 4. Of the six eligible Turkish citizen candidates, Atesyan and two others accepted candidacy. Atesyan is viewed by many in the community as being too complacent and lacking the necessary diplomatic skills for the religious and political representational role of patriarch. During such a sensitive political period in relations between Armenia and Turkey, the community's leadership is a decisive variable in the outlook for its future. End Summary.

The Process

¶2. (SBU) Armenian Patriarch Mutafyan Mesrob II has been suffering from dementia since late 2007, and in mid-2008, Archbishop Aram Atesyan took over the administrative responsibilities of the patriarchy as acting patriarch (Ref A). Following a meeting with the community's religious council in November, Atesyan acknowledged the need to move forward with the election of a co-patriarch and, after receiving approval from the Catholicos (the head of the Armenian Orthodox Church) in Yerevan, on December 3 the Patriarchate applied to the Turkish Ministry of the Interior for permission to begin the election process for a co-Patriarch. Upon the death of Mesrob II, the co-patriarch would assume the position of full patriarch. (Note: While the Armenian Patriarchate in Istanbul is autocephalous, it falls under the administrative jurisdiction of the Catholicos and therefore needs to obtain the Catholicos permission to begin the election process. End Note.) There is no precedent for the role of co-Patriarch in Turkey. This is the first time an election will occur while the Patriarch is still in his seat and living. According to the Very Reverend Father Tatoul Anoushian, the co-Patriarch model was suggested by the Catholicos. Anoushian related that the Patriarchate has yet to receive final approval from the MOI with regard to the date of the election, but did receive initial approval to review candidates for the position. Anoushian anticipates the elections will be held before Easter (April 4).

¶3. (SBU) Once the MOI grants approval for the election to

proceed, the Patriarchate's election commission administers a two step system in which members of the Armenian Orthodox community of Turkey vote at churches for delegates who then elect the patriarch and the religious council. There is only one religious council per patriarchal tenure and the current council was elected when Mesrob II took office in 1998. The delegates who elect the patriarch and council serve only once and then disband, by decree of the MOI. Because delegates can only be elected when the MOI grants its approval, no community-wide elections can occur without GOT involvement and consent based on a canon of laws (nizamname) first established in 1863 and continued by the MOI after the founding of the Republic.

14. (C) Former member of the Patriarch's advisory council, Murat Bilir, said that Atesyan did not consult the advisory council about the decision to go forward with the election and only learned of it from the papers before an official announcement from the Patriarchate. According to Bilir, in response to what they perceived as a power grab and insult by Atesyan, members of the Patriarch's advisory council resigned en masse. In earlier discussions, Atesyan had told us that he was under tremendous pressure from the community and religious council to bring about the election of a new patriarch. Anoushian said Atesyan was finally convinced of the need for action in late November 2009 after a meeting with the religious council where the co-patriarch model was agreed upon. The advisory council was miffed that he went to the MOI for approval without consulting them, and Bilir suggested it may be because Atesyan wanted to control the process.

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Limited Candidates

15. (SBU) Candidates for the position of Armenian Patriarch in Turkey must be citizens of Turkey according to 1923 and 1970 mandates (talimats) from the Istanbul governorship. Of the six eligible candidates, including the two Archbishops of the American Archdiocese, only three have expressed their interest in candidacy. These three include the current acting patriarch Archbishop Aram Atesyan; Bishop Sebuhi Culcuyan currently serving in Armenia; and, Archbishop Karekin Bekciyan currently serving in Germany.

16. (C) Bishop Culcuyan (50, Armenia): Born in Malatya in south central Turkey, Culcuyan lived most of his life outside of Turkey and is what Anoushian considers an Armenian nationalist who does not know Turkey and is bound to the Mother See of Etchmiadzin in Armenia. Anoushian and others expressed concern that Bishop Culcuyan may make the Patriarchate an arm of the Armenian government which would further the already strong Turkish predilection to consider Turkey's Armenian Orthodox community as foreign.

17. (C) Archbishop Bekciyan (60, Germany): Anoushian and Bilir both reported that Archbishop Bekciyan was hoping to retire instead of continue his clerical career. Neither could explain why Bekciyan chose instead to accept the offer of candidacy. According to Anoushian, "he is a good man but not for this job." One of the contributing factors to Bekciyan's unsuitability, Anoushian said, was his ignorance about conditions in Turkey. He made a statement to the religious council indicating his understanding that the GOT would reopen Halki soon and allow Armenian clerics to train there as well.

18. (C) Archbishop Atesyan (55, Turkey): Members of the Armenian lay and clerical community suggested Atesyan is the only viable candidate. Anoushian said the community is divided, but the majority will grudgingly vote for Atesyan due to the weakness of the other candidates. He described Atesyan as a humanist who would rather not risk making waves with the GOT and therefore stays quiet - too quiet for many.

¶9. (C) The limited number of eligible bishops due to the citizenship requirement did not disquiet Anoushian because "in order to successfully work with the Turkish government and people you need to have been born here and have an understanding of this country." Unfortunately, he also noted, the GOT does not recognize the benefit of having such clerics and refuses to allow for training facilities for future clerics of the country's minority religions. Instead, clerics must train and largely practice outside of Turkey.

Less than Positive Perspectives on Atesyan

¶10. (C) Community member Lena Elmaoglu expressed her concern about the qualifications of Atesyan for the position of patriarch. She cited what she perceived as his limited education, difficulty with foreign languages and "overall lack of wisdom" as causes for concern. Another community member said that she and many others are disappointed with Atesyan's leadership as acting patriarch. As patriarch, she said, Atesyan would have to represent the political and religious needs of the community, something for which she believes he does not have sufficient dignity. Both community members expressed confidence that the Armenian community is "entering a dark period."

¶11. (C) Bilir said he and the former members of the advisory council believe Archbishop Atesyan is "not exactly suitable" for the position of patriarch and questions the motivations behind the Archbishop's sudden change of mind regarding pushing for an election. A patriarch must be both a wise, educated, diplomatic man, according to Bilir, capable of representing the needs and the problems of the people rather than pretending there are none.

¶12. (U) In an interview with Hurriyet Daily News' Vercihan Ziglioglu (also Turkish Armenian), Turkish-Armenian academic Seven Nisanyan said that Mesrob II changed the general perception among the community that "being afraid of one's own shadow was a commendable trait." He expressed the hope that the community and new patriarch "will not prefer the old policy of succumbing and silence in the name of peace and accord in the country."

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¶13. (C) Comment. In a field regarded by many of the faithful as weak, Atesyan will likely win the patriarchal election even though he lacks a strong constituency. This is a sensitive period for the Armenian Orthodox community: the parliaments of Armenia and Turkey are considering approving the protocol between the two countries signed on October 14, 2009; the "Armenian Genocide Resolution" may be more heatedly debated in Congress in light of Turkey's relationship with Israel and its impact on previous amicable relationships with the Jewish population in the United States; and, more open discussion about the tragic events of 1915 heightens resentment among some Turks even if it is a healthy development in the long run. The period ahead holds promise for the Armenian Orthodox community in Turkey, but the complex situation make the community's leadership a decisive variable. From what we understand of Atesyan's character, he is not capable of effectively playing the same dual role of diplomat and church leader as was played by Mesrob II. End comment.

WIENER